

## Generation Earth Portugal: Promoting Youth Leadership on Sustainable Practices

Inês Ferreira, Maria Gorjão

Contrasting with the myth that young people are dormant beings when it comes to social and political questions, in recent years as a reaction to politicians' inaction to counteract climate change, we observed a rising engagement of youth in environmental matters. Young people nowadays will be the ones that, unfortunately, will have to deal with the devastating consequences of climate change, loss of natural resources and biodiversity. From all around the world, youngsters have begun to realise the need to advocate for sustainable development in order to guarantee a safe and sane future on planet earth. Furthermore, ANP|WWF Portugal is aligned with WWF's commitment to the United Nations: bring awareness to biodiversity and sustainable development values to a thousand million individuals. As a result, ANP|WWF Portugal, following the steps of Generation Earth Austria, decided to create Generation Earth Portugal, a volunteering-based program with the purpose of empowering youth to take action against environmental problems by promoting civic participation, informal education and community projects.

In the summer of 2020, we launched the first edition of Generation Earth Portugal by forming a group of 14 members - which has since expanded to 24 -with ages ranging from 15 to 30 years old and coming from various backgrounds.

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### ***Generation Earth: An international network of green thinkers with Austrian roots***

It all started in 2010 when youth answered the call of WWF Austria which was looking for teens wanting to make a difference in their

educational program. The 7 young people aged 14 to 18 years old went on and created the new youth empowerment program with their first campaigns tackling plastic pollution and covered by EU funds for two years.

Between 2010 and 2022, Generation Earth has been a network of young and engaged people wanting to take action for the future of their planet. To do so, they create events and implement a variety of projects to learn and share knowledge to preserve a more sustainable future. International exchanges, sustainable consumerism, biodiversity protection, plastic pollution, protection of natural water sources are some of the challenges they are focusing on and that have a multifaceted impact on our environments and food systems.

Since 2015, the WWF-GE Steering Committee developed a 2020 Strategic Plan to keep on creating training opportunities, collect the lessons learned and keep on building a community of skilled and engaged youth, capable of implementing youth leadership programs in every WWF office present in the world!

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### **Testimonials: training and inspiration**

**Inês Ferreira**

*“GE Portugal has given me the opportunity and tools to acquire practical knowledge about communication, social media, team management and event planning alongside an amazing team of young leaders. “*

### **Sofia Vogensen**

*“As a young person, having this opportunity is a sign of the times we are living, both challenging and unique. I am grateful to be able to challenge myself while simultaneously having the chance to pass on knowledge, empower and multiply impact through others like me. “*

### **Maria Gorjão**

*“Since I joined GE Portugal, I feel encouraged to engage in as many activities concerning environmental protection as I can. I know I can count on our team's support, that sentiment is decisive and uplifting when it has to be.”*

### **Crisis and entrepreneurship: challenges and opportunities**

Generation Earth Portugal was created amidst the pandemic and our members are based in distinct regions, therefore, we had to adapt our work strategies to a fully remote mode in the first edition. Fortunately, this year we were able to conduct our introductory and empowerment workshops in person.

While the previous edition was directed by ANP|WWF Portugal, we transitioned to a coordination and mentorship team composed of the earlier members as our intent is to establish a program for youth and led by youth.

Due to the lack of prior experience in conducting a volunteering program, we have adopted an experimental methodology, taking advantage of good leadership practices and being honest and self-critical about our weaknesses. Regardless, we hold transparency and horizontality as collective values. It has undoubtedly been a non-stop learning experience to those involved, as we strive to find adequate work methods for our program.

### **Food production and environmental weaknesses of Portugal: A song of droughts and fires**

Portugal and the South of Spain could be experiencing an intense desertification by 2100. If temperatures aren't maintained between 1.5-2 degrees, most Mediterranean countries may become inhabitable and some regions will become deserts. Recent fires have caused a large number of victims and a significant environmental impact on soils, air and overall pollution.

In 2022, the lack of rain in January has made it the second most dry month since 2000 on the Peninsula. An exceptional decrease of precipitation and high intensity drought lasted for weeks, even revealing an old town submerged for almost 70 years in Zêzere river banks. Unfortunately, this drought severely affected farmers by forcing them to leave the sector, which hampers the realisation of the national priority of reaching self-sufficiency and disrupts national food security.

Amidst the problems mentioned above, an increase in intensive agriculture has been noticed. Monocultures of olive trees and avocados significantly mark the landscape in Portugal's South, contributing to soil exhaustion and the contamination of subterranean water reserves. Cultures of Eucalyptus are another obvious example, they collectively represent 25% of Portugal's forests and are very flammable.

Chaotic and exponential, the neglect of cultures and agriculture is strongly connected with the fires that continue to devastate the country from time to time. For the last 20 years, in the whole European Union, Portugal has been the country most affected by fires. A change needs to happen, and this change will be carried by a generation of

sustainable thinkers.

### Implementation and achievements: united by our common goal

In the previous edition, our common goal was to design projects that addressed sustainable consumption; however, since big problems require big solutions, we divided our strength according to our interests to tackle this issue from different perspectives and with distinct strategies. By the end of the year, we had given life to four projects concerning this topic.

**Sustentabilidade** aspired to promote simple sustainable living by hosting a one-day online event gathering multiple Portuguese environmentally-friendly projects and companies from various sectors: food and catering, composting, clothing and lifestyle. By combining short presentations with discussion segments, we enabled the exchange of knowledge and ideas between 11 speakers and approximately 80 participants, highlighting the significance of individual responsible consumption, repurposing and recycling materials, supporting local trade and selecting seasonal products to reduce our carbon footprint. The event was topped off with a gift basket, with products kindly offered by the speakers through a raffle.



Photo Credits : Generation Earth Portugal

**Awareness Seed** started its journey by promoting an online event with several guest speakers to debate plant-based diets and the food industry. In parallel, an Instagram account was created, aiming to inform the general public about sustainability, health and animal ethics.

**Safe Planet** also opted for a virtual format. The group created a website with an online exhibition that revolved around a photo gallery of Portugal's wild species, bringing attention to the impact of human consumption on biodiversity loss. In addition, short informative texts addressing deforestation and agriculture, overfishing, food waste and its link to overpopulation, fast-fashion and plastics were also included.

**Mobi Green** aimed to inspire youth of different regions in Portugal to be more politically active by creating solutions to mitigate the impact of each location's environmental problems. To empower their ideas, we organised a contest among high school students and promoted dialogue between them and their local municipalities. As an outcome of this contest, a pioneer composting project was implemented in two highschools in Chaves and a collaboration with Mudatuga, an innovative startup in the composting field, was achieved.



Generation Earth's logo - Credits : GE Portugal

Collectively, our projects had a direct impact on almost five hundred people and an indirect impact on approximately ten thousand.

Since the previous projects were specially designed to promote civic participation and community involvement, the members of Generation Earth Portugal considered the possibility of developing an advocacy-oriented action to spread our message through alternative means. Therefore, in September of 2020 we wrote a letter addressing the Portuguese President to make biodiversity a priority in the Heads of State Biodiversity Summit of the United Nations. Our demand and associated video successfully received mediatic exposure, being published by several national papers, and the President mentioned several aspects we identified as a priority at the UN Conference.



Photo credits: Generation Earth Portugal

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### ***Mudatuga : A composting movement and business led by Youth***

*Mudatuga* is a Portuguese startup co-founded in 2020 by Carolina Bianchi and Giulia Braghieri. The objective was to create a movement of “composting ninjas” by giving the tools to anyone to engage in composting while in the comfort of their homes. They offer a variety of services and products, with new ones being sold on European markets starting this summer 2022.

Nominated by the World Economic Forum as top innovator fighting climate change, Mudatuga has focused for the last two years on education and raising awareness. They co-created and implemented a composting summer school in Lisbon in 2021, making it the biggest national initiative with more than 1000 students involved and 40 workshops held in five weeks.

Mudatuga follows the pre-composting method Bokashi, which uses fermentation to accelerate the pre-composting stage of organic waste and try to get rid of liquids - with a ratio of less than 25% left. After two weeks, you get your pre-composted bio waste that you can use as a domestic fertilizer.

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### ***Future prospects: dreams of sustainability***

Generation Earth Portugal’s integration in the international project Eat4Change ensures four more editions of the programme. Up until then, the methodology behind the program consisted of annual funding to create and complete action projects. With newly found prospects for the future, granted by Eat4Change, and a progressively more autonomous youth-led team, we are undergoing a reflective and transformative period to define the basis of our methodology that can include a sense of continuity and reach a longer, widespread and more ambitious impact. To successfully come out of this reflective and restructuring period of innovation for our future editions, we are organising an internal event where we will meet with specialists that can help us make informed public decisions and opinions on controversial topics (nuclear energy for example), decide on how we will define our democratic processes (internal voting systems) and also the program’s structure, methodology and funding. Furthermore, a youth working group was formed meanwhile to be responsible for searching and collecting funding opportunities and application processes.

For our second edition, three projects regarding sustainable diets are in the works to be implemented over the next months.

### Useful links

Safe Planet Website:  
<https://safeplanetge3.wixsite.com/website>

Letter to the Portuguese President:  
<https://www.publico.pt/2020/09/28/p3/noticia/jovens-pedem-ajuda-marcelo-protoger-saude-humana-planeta-1933119>

Eat4Change: <https://i-eat4change.com/>

### SOCIAL MEDIA

**Instagram:** @generationearthpt

**Facebook:** generationearthPT

**Twitter:** @generation\_pt

**TikTok:** @generationearthpt

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**Maria Gorjão** has a bachelor's degree in Biology and is currently doing a Masters in Evolutionary and Developmental Biology. Like most of my peers, she feels that progress towards sustainable development is not only necessary, but urgent. Like in Developmental Biology, in the field of Sustainability, context is everything. Despite the rush, measures must fit the needs of each community and aim to solve structural problems, instead of "cleaning the dust". In parallel to my studies, I plan to promote informal education about the importance of an integrative approach when dealing with societal challenge.

**Inês Ferreira** is currently in the third year of her integrated master's degree in Veterinary Medicine. Being able to study not only animal behaviour and physiology, but also food production and ecosystems' dynamics, she strives to develop projects that face the "big picture". This means merging knowledge about safe production, resources use, animal welfare and balanced diets to promote overall sustainability and health of the ecosystem. In addition, she always tries to bring attention to environmentalism's social slope, since actions must be adapted to the needs and challenges of each community, whilst gaining the interest and participation of its members